

From Inability to Expert: Using Personal Motivation to Prepare Future Reading Teachers

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Abstract: The demand for confident reading teachers is greater than ever before. To guarantee successful reading instruction, teachers across the nation are being trained in the science of reading, which focuses on explicit instruction in phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. Large reading initiatives are tirelessly working on plans to implement the science of reading training to in-service teachers; however, what are universities doing to support their efforts? Dr. Kelli Smith, Dr. Tami Shelley, and Mrs. Pam Higgins teach reading instruction to early childhood and elementary students at Auburn University at Montgomery (AUM). Our experiences as elementary students, teachers, and leadership roles drive our desire to prepare pre-service teachers with the tools and skills needed to be confident reading educators. The following presentation will offer a more in-depth view of our motivation to learn science of reading instructional strategies so that we can best prepare our students as future reading teachers.

Keywords: Science of reading, Preservice teachers, Education courses

Introduction

The demand for confident reading teachers is greater than ever before. Based on the Alabama State Department Report Card for 2018-2019, over 55% of students in k-12 are less than proficient in reading (<https://www.alsde.edu/dept/erc/Pages/home.aspx>). Dr. Eric Mackey, State Department of Education Superintendent, along with a team of experts, passed the Alabama Literacy Act in 2019 to ensure students are proficient in foundational reading skills by the end of 3rd grade. To guarantee successful reading instruction, teachers across the state of Alabama are being trained in the science of reading, which focuses on explicit instruction in phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. The Alabama Reading

Initiative (ARI) is tirelessly working on a plan to implement the science of reading training to in-service teachers; however, what are universities doing to support their efforts?

Dr. Kelli Smith, Dr. Tami Shelley, and Mrs. Pam Higgins teach reading instruction to early childhood and elementary students at Auburn University at Montgomery (AUM). Our experiences as elementary students, teachers, and a principal drive our desire to prepare pre-service teachers with the tools and skills needed to be confident reading educators. The following stories offer a more in-depth view of our motivation to learn science of reading instructional strategies so that we can best prepare our students as future reading teachers.

Dr. Smith's Story

I remember sitting at the small group reading table during center time, praying for the teacher to not ask me to read aloud. I was less than confident with my ability to pronounce words and read fluently. Even at six years old, I knew my foundation in reading was less than par. In the early 1980's, reading instruction was taught using the whole language approach. This curriculum operates on the premise that real-life experiences and background knowledge can facilitate new learning. The program uses different language skills such as writing, reading, listening, and speaking to build a reading foundation. Although these skills are important, there was a lack of instruction on phonemic awareness, phonics, and fluency.

During my tenure as an elementary teacher, I spent countless hours participating in professional development for reading instruction. Trainers would discuss ways to integrate phonics skills, the purpose of counting syllables, and how assessment can drive instruction. Needless to say, my ability to understand these concepts was frustrating because I had zero background knowledge to support this reasoning. I taught first grade for one year and I believe this was one of the hardest years of my teaching career. Recognizing the importance of reading instruction, coupled with my inability to grasp the concepts, was exasperating. During grade level meetings I continued to ask the questions "Why are we teaching this?" and "How is this going to help my students?" I ended that year feeling sorry for my first-grade students and decided it was time to transfer to an upper level classroom.

One of my greatest accomplishments was completing my doctorate in elementary education. Knowing I would have to write a dissertation was, undoubtedly, the most difficult part of the degree. I doubted my skills as a reader and a writer which caused great strife in the whole process. Several years later I found myself applying for a higher education position as a reading professor for pre-service elementary education students. Since my goal was to become a college instructor I decided to apply. Knowing my hesitations about teaching reading, I thought this would be a perfect time to learn effective reading strategies in order to better prepare future teachers.

Once hired I learned our school had received a grant to attend the Language Essentials for Teaching Reading and Spelling (LETRS) training. Since previous professional developments did not provide adequate training on

reading instruction, I automatically thought this program would be the same. However, what I learned on the first day of coaching was the biggest “AHA” moment of my teaching career. The LETRS program is grounded in the science of reading, which asserts that learning to read is a difficult process. Teachers implementing the strategies and lessons based on this research explicitly teach phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, comprehension, and vocabulary skills. Using these teaching strategies can hopefully provide a solid reading foundation and expose areas of weakness. Over the two-year course, I have gained a considerable amount of knowledge on the teaching of reading. I continue to think back to the year I taught first grade. I wonder what type of readers they would have been if I had known these strategies?

Dr. Shelley’s Story

Graduating with a teaching degree in early childhood education in 1980, provided me with exposure to both whole language reading instruction and basic phonics instruction. I was definitely aware of the two camps of reading instruction. As I look back on some of my first teaching positions, I was very fortunate to be surrounded by colleagues that were committed to reading instruction being a combination of phonics and whole language. At times, this became quite a challenge with time constraints of instructional time and the need for supplementing programs in the area of phonics.

During the beginning of my career, most reading programs were based around a balanced literacy approach (whole language) which encouraged the use of authentic literature with an emphasis on comprehension. The literature rich classroom environment was established hoping to provide students with opportunities for real-world purposes for reading. Classrooms were labeled, read the room activities abounded, and enjoyment of reading was an overall goal.

Recognition of common sight words was considered a part of the whole language approach. Looking back at phonics supplementation with these balanced literacy programs, I would have to say that they fell under the headings of synthetic phonics (one to one correspondence between phonemes and graphemes) and analytic phonics (phonograms used to generalize words; example “fail”, “trail”, “mail”, etc.) approaches. I was also a classroom teacher during the time of “reading and writing workshop” which is based on the teacher modeling a whole group strategy lesson and students are given blocks of time to read and practice the strategy. I had a lot of exposure to a variety of reading approaches.

This variety of reading instruction approaches still left some gaps for me when it came to reading instruction. The struggling reader was the largest gap. What happens when a student simply can’t pick up on phoneme/grapheme blending? The more explicit reading instruction measures for phonics and fully understanding the why and how of that explicit instruction was definitely a gap that existed in my training. As a college professor instructing preservice teachers in reading methods, enrollment in the Language Essentials for Teachers of Reading and Spelling (LETRS) training program was the perfect “gap filler”.

The LETRS training program provided me with the most current research on what, when, and how language skills need to be taught. LETRS has been a two-year commitment in time and learning but it has been invaluable to me as I prepare pre-service teachers to become more complete and competent instructors of reading.

Mrs. Higgins' Story

After working in education for 37 years, I can honestly say that my understanding of how to be an effective reading teacher is just now becoming cemented. Being a lifetime learner is critical in this ever-changing world of education. When I graduated from college, I had no idea how to teach a child to read. It wasn't until 20 teaching years later I was enlightened on how a child learns to read.

I began to enjoy teaching reading when I taught 4th grade and our school received a grant for purchasing sets of children's literatures to teach with instead of a program with basal readers. It forced me to develop lessons where I chose the vocabulary words and comprehension skills that would be taught. It was theme based and the students truly enjoyed the fun activities that we as a faculty created to go along with each theme. Although this was a new way of teaching, it did not meet the needs of my struggling readers. I was at a loss on how to help those who were not on grade level.

In my 19th year of teaching, the Alabama Reading Initiative (ARI) began. It focused on beginning reading in grades K-3. My school was chosen as one of the "sweet sixteen" schools in the state to pilot the initiative. Since I taught 4th grade I did not participate in the initial training; however, I was trained in the second year of its existence. It was during my 20th year of teaching that I learned about the role of a reading coach, which is a vital part of ARI. I experienced how helpful it was to have a knowledgeable coach support me in reading instruction. The next year I became a reading coach at a very low performing school.

My professional development in reading instruction was fast and furious! I learned a vast amount about the science of reading and how to effectively coach teachers of reading in my two years as a school-based coach. I then became a regional coach where I was assigned different school coaches to visit and support. I enjoyed this opportunity because it allowed me to observe many different reading programs and attempt to offer help where it was needed.

I moved on next to work with ARI at the state department level. At this point I assumed I knew all there was to know about reading, but as education goes there is always more to learn. My work was different now because I was responsible for helping create the "new learning" for teachers who were like me and had no idea how to teach reading. This was very exciting and challenging.

In conclusion, our story of becoming proficient reading instructors to pre-service elementary education students is far from over. The stressors that once overwhelmed Dr. Smith at the reading table in first grade still appear

every now and then. These anxieties continue to drive her desire to equip pre-service students with all the tools needed to be successful, because one day there will be a first-grade student sitting at their reading table praying for the teacher to not call on them. Although the LETRS training has been a two-year commitment in time and learning, Dr. Shelley believes it has been invaluable to her as she prepares pre-service teachers to become more complete and competent instructors of reading. Mrs. Higgins believes teaching pre-service teachers about reading is definitely the icing on the cake. She wants to ensure that our college students graduate with skills needed to be proficient reading teachers. Although each of our perspectives of reading instruction has varied throughout the years, there is one commonality between us: we desire to learn more about reading instruction in order to equip our students with the tools and skills needed to be effective reading teachers.